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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Fifty-eighth session

Summary record of the 1223rd meeting
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 4 July 2014, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Ameline

Contents

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Combined second and third periodic reports of the Syrian Arab Republic

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention *(continued)*

Combined second and third periodic reports of the Syrian Arab Republic (CEDAW/C/SYR/2; CEDAW/C/SYR/Q/2 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Ms. Al Shammat** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Syrian Constitution protected women's rights and guaranteed the equal treatment of men and women before the law. The fact that the Syrian Arab Republic had signed all the international treaties relating to women was a clear indication of the importance the Government attached to the rights of women. The Government was committed to ending discrimination against women in all sectors and had already made significant progress towards achieving that aim in the judiciary. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs had been responsible for drafting the periodic report currently under consideration (CEDAW/C/SYR/2). The information contained in the report was based on qualitative and quantative data collected from various State entities concerned with the advancement of women. Non-governmental organizations had also provided input for the report.

3. Since the beginning of the conflict, in March 2011, around 6 million people had been internally displaced. The Government was working with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and civil society organizations to provide humanitarian assistance in all regions of the country. However, armed terrorist groups often thwarted efforts to provide such assistance by targeting convoys transporting supplies and civil airports. Those armed terrorist groups did not respect international treaties, international law or human rights. Moreover, they believed that women were inferior and that they had no rights, and often targeted civilians. They committed criminal acts such as abduction, rape, murder and the mutilation of corpses. All those groups were linked to Al-Qaida and included foreign combatants of many different nationalities. Those groups received support from both Middle Eastern States that did not recognize human rights and from Western States that claimed to support democracy and human rights.

4. The State had taken a number of measures to protect the Syrian families affected by the conflict. Female heads of household in particular received special support. All female employees of governmental institutions were continuing to receive their salaries and benefits despite the fact that such institutions were often targeted by armed terrorist groups. The Government also paid compensation to the victims of terrorist attacks. Under the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan, the Government had launched a number of programmes aimed at providing women, particularly female heads of household, with access to income-generating activities.

5. Women could stand for all political and administrative posts. It should be noted that the current Vice-President of the Syrian Arab Republic was a woman. Moreover, the People's Assembly had 30 female members and a woman currently chaired the Higher Commission for Syrian Relief. On the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Ministry of Social Affairs had organized a workshop aimed at defining the role of Syrian women in the peace process.

6. Pursuant to a recommendation made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Government had strengthened the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, which was its national machinery for the advancement of women. The Commission was in the process of setting up the Family Protection Unit, which was to begin operating in October 2014. The Government had modified curricula at all levels with a view to raising awareness among

students of women's rights and eliminating stereotyped concepts of the roles of women. The modified curricula covered rights such as the right of girls to education; to choose their profession; to choose their husband; to equal opportunities in employment; to equality in rights and duties in society and within the family; to equality before the law; to medical care; and to access to family planning services. Cooperation agreements had been concluded with the Ministry of Justice with a view to propagating a culture of law that would serve to correct prevailing beliefs about women and to raise awareness of their rights. A series of seminars, conferences and lectures aimed at raising the public awareness of the need to eliminate such stereotypes had also taken place.

7. The provision of article 508 of the Criminal Code exempting rapists from punishment if they married their victims had been repealed and replaced by a provision prescribing a prison sentence of at least 2 years to rapists, even if they married the victim. Furthermore, a rapist who married his victim had to be retried if he terminated the marriage or a divorce was granted in favour of the victim within five years of the marriage, including the sentence served by the rapist. Article 183 of the Criminal Code had also been amended to explicitly criminalize corporal punishment. Many Syrian women had been the victims of violence committed by armed terrorist groups. In addition, the Wahhabi and other fatwas (*takfiri*) denouncing people as unbelievers permitted sexual violence against women under *jihad al-nikah* commonly known as "sexual jihad". Individuals found guilty of perpetrating any form of violence against women were prosecuted and punished. Female victims of violence could seek refuge in care centres, where they had access to health-care services and could undergo rehabilitation with a view to their social reintegration. Many female victims of sexual violence perpetrated in the name of sexual jihad were being cared for in such centres. In addition, the Ministry of Health had converted health-care centres into emergency centres.

8. The Government had organized a series of seminars intended to raise public awareness of the Convention, as well as activities aimed at capacity-building of national institutions working with women and children. It was difficult to carry out a preliminary assessment of the extent of gender-based violence in the country because such matters were not normally spoken of under prevailing social customs and traditions, and many false accusations were made in that connection to achieve political ends. However, the Ministry of Social Affairs, in cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund, was endeavouring to carry out a preliminary assessment of the situation of displaced women and to identify the problems affecting them.

9. Civil society organizations also played a vital role in providing humanitarian assistance to citizens in areas where armed terrorist forces were present. They also monitored human rights violations committed against women and children, and provided assistance to victims of such violations.

10. The committee established under Legislative Decree No. 941 had amended legislation on nationality dating from 1969 so that both Syrian men and women could pass on their nationality to any children born of a marriage with a non-Syrian national. Furthermore, under Legislative Decree No. 49 of 2011, Syrian nationality had been granted to Syrian Kurds registered as foreigners. Upon reaching the age of 18 Syrian Kurds who had not been registered with the civil registry could be listed on their father's record under a special procedure. The Government had taken measures to ensure that Syrian nationals of both sexes were provided with identity documents, especially in areas where armed terrorist groups had destroyed civil records.

11. Unfair economic sanctions had had an adverse effect on the lives of women and children, as they had undermined the effectiveness of international poverty reduction initiatives, as well as that of education and health-care services. The Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan was, in itself, a human rights violation. The Israeli forces exploited water

resources, levied high taxes, forced children to perform hazardous work and had confiscated agricultural land, forcing Syrians to work in Israeli factories. Moreover, Syrian women were frequently subjected to insults and harassment, and Syrians living in the occupied Syrian Golan were prevented from seeing their families. The Syrian Arab Republic was committed to peace in the Middle East but that aim could only be achieved through the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied Syrian Golan.

Articles 1 to 3

12. **Ms. Haidar** said that the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic had taken a heavy toll on the civilian population and on women in particular. United Nations Security Council resolution 2139 (2014) had called for all parties to put an end to all forms of violence and to allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all civilians. Protecting civilians should remain the highest priority on the ground. Furthermore, women should participate in all negotiations aimed at restoring the country's sovereignty. It was necessary for the peace and reconciliation process to be as inclusive as possible if it was to be successful.

13. **Ms. Patten** said that war crimes and crimes against humanity were becoming commonplace occurrences in the Syrian Arab Republic. She asked whether the State party had considered drawing up a four-year action plan for implementing the Committee's concluding observations. She recalled that, under the Convention, the State party was required to protect women's rights and to promote substantive gender equality before, during and after conflict. The Committee had received reports that the Government, army and police routinely violated the human rights of civilians. There were reports of women and girls being raped at checkpoints and during house searches and incursions, and of women and children being tortured in places of detention by Government forces. She would be interested to hear the delegation's views on those reports and to know of the measures the State party was taking to protect women and girls from sexual violence and to give effect to the recommendations of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic on the protection of civilians. She also asked why the State party had rejected the recommendations made by the Human Rights Council in the context of the universal periodic review.

14. **Ms. Šimonović** said that the Convention applied both in times of peace and in times of conflict. The fact that the State party had still not withdrawn its reservations to the Convention, particularly to article 2, impeded its effective implementation. She asked whether the State party planned to withdraw its reservations to the Convention in the near future and whether it intended to ratify the Optional Protocol so that the Committee could conduct an independent inquiry into the situation of women in the Syrian Arab Republic. She also wished to know: whether the State party had considered drafting new legislation to address gender-based discrimination specifically; how many cases of sexual violence it had documented; and what compensation had been paid to victims of such acts.

15. **Ms. Pires** said that the Committee's general recommendation No. 6 called upon States parties to strengthen their national machinery for the advancement of women and to ensure that it had adequate resources to advise on the impact on women of all government policies, to monitor the situation of women comprehensively, and to help formulate new policies and effectively carry out strategies and measures to eliminate discrimination. In the current context of armed conflict, there was a clear need for robust, dynamic and effective national machinery to protect and advance women's rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. She asked why the position of head of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs had been downgraded from a ministerial position to a senior administrative position. Noting that the current mandate of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs to advance the status of women in their capacity as family members could serve to reinforce the stereotype of women as childbearers, she asked whether the State party planned to update the

Commission's mandate to make it an independent, high-level authority for the promotion of women's rights. Lastly, she wished to know whether the State party had taken steps to evaluate the impact of the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women and whether it had adopted a strategy to address the negative impact of the crisis on women.

16. **Ms. Al Shammat** (Syrian Arab Republic) assured the Committee that the Government supported all Syrians, irrespective of their background and allegiance and had not been involved in alleged human rights violations on the ground. It was working to address the obstacles to women's full participation in the peacebuilding and reconstruction process.

17. **Ms. Akkach** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the new Constitution adopted in 2012 established a transitional period of three years for the amendment of laws that were not concordant with its provisions, including any discriminatory articles. The committee established to oversee the reforms had already submitted recommendations to the Government. New laws had been promulgated to address conflict-related violence against women and existing laws would be aligned with the Convention's provisions as part of the reform process.

18. **Ms. Mahmoud Alasmar** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Committee's recommendations would be transposed into workplans that would be duly implemented. She assured the Committee that its Government would cooperate fully, as it had done in the universal periodic review process and in reviews before other treaty bodies, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2011.

19. She had been part of a team that had visited various Government-run prisons and detention centres to check the adequacy of medical provision and absence of rape, torture and other forms of violence against women. If desired, she could provide documentary records of those visits that would allow the Committee to verify that due process was observed and laws relating to female prisoners were respected. Figures, names and telephone numbers could be made available, if needed, attesting to the Government's commitment to transparency and accountability. The new laws promulgated during the crisis criminalized acts of sexual violence against children and women without distinction, whether committed by civilians, military officials, police officers or soldiers.

20. From 2011 to 2014, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs had formed part of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In early 2014 its budget, responsibilities and autonomy had been extended and its title adjusted to reflect those changes. Under its new title, the Commission for Family and Population Affairs, it continued to work with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme to evaluate the effects of the crisis on women and develop appropriate policies for addressing them.

21. **Ms. Al Shammat** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that she too had been involved in visits to detention centres to follow up on allegations of rape by government security forces. Her team had found no female detainees in any of the facilities concerned.

22. **Ms. Essa** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, having met with around 3,000 detainees in Syrian State-run prisons and investigated numerous alleged violations, she could personally attest to the existence of appropriate health care and absence of torture. She had also been able to verify that women had been promptly brought before the legal authorities and that those found not to have engaged in serious criminal activity had been released. She had, however, been informed of acts of violence against women in Homs, Al Hasakah, Latakia and Damascus that should not be allowed to go unpunished.

23. The Government had adopted a truth and reconciliation strategy based on the model deployed in South Africa. Components of the model included the Ministry of National Reconciliation, national reconciliation committees and the Syrian Women's Initiative for

Peace and Democracy, a committee of 15 elected officials representing Syrian women, including representatives of opposition parties. The aim of the Initiative was to ensure that women had a central role in guiding Syria towards peace. The Initiative had drafted a workplan and formulated a number of demands, one of which was that women must account for no less than 40 per cent of all teams and committees engaged in the negotiation process.

24. Tolerance and trust would be the guiding principles of the reconciliation process. However, tolerance did not mean that women and children would be denied the right to justice; the authorities were firmly committed to ensuring that those who had committed crimes against the Syrian people should be punished. Rehabilitation would be a priority, nonetheless. The war had changed the stereotypical roles of women as they were called on to assume a role in ending the crisis and protecting the social fabric and integrity of their country.

25. **Ms. Haidar** asked what the State party was doing to ensure that bureaucratic obstacles did not prevent humanitarian aid from reaching those in need. Noting that the government teams had visited only official prison facilities and that even the International Committee of the Red Cross had been unable to access unofficial places of detention, she highlighted the need to ensure that alleged offences committed by the security forces were duly investigated. Lastly, expressing concern that the antiterrorism law could potentially limit the freedom of human rights activists, given the manner in which it was being enforced, she asked the delegation to clarify the 60-day pre-charge detention rule.

26. **Ms. Patten** asked for information about measures taken to implement specific recommendations made in connection with the universal periodic review, including, the recommendation to address allegations of involuntary disappearances, arbitrary arrests and the routine use of torture, amongst other violations, contained in paragraph 102.8 of the Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (A/HRC/19/11). She also asked whether any action was being taken in relation to rejected recommendations, including the recommendations to abolish legislative provisions that granted State officials immunity from prosecution and to allow access to international media, independent media and diplomats.

27. Noting that an update issued by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in June 2014 had referred to cases of abduction of women and girls by members of pro-government militias and of women detained at checkpoints ending up in official detention facilities, she asked what was preventing the Government from issuing command orders prohibiting the use of sexual violence and holding security officers accountable for such actions, in accordance with United Nations Security Council resolution 2106 (2013). Would the Government consider granting independent, impartial observers, including the experts of the Committee, access to Syrian detention facilities in which women and girls were held?

28. **Ms. Halperin-Kaddari** expressed concern that the new Constitution established sharia and Islamic jurisprudence as legitimate sources of law while at the same time guaranteeing gender equality, and that discriminatory provisions, such as mitigated sentencing for honour killings and the exception for marital rape, had not been eliminated. She sought an update on progress towards withdrawal of the State party's reservations to articles 2 and 16 of the Convention, which appeared to have stalled.

29. **Ms. Šimonović** asked the delegation to clarify the obstacles to withdrawal of the reservations.

30. **Ms. Pires** asked what findings the evaluation of the impact on the crisis on women had produced and whether they were being used to develop a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the effects. The Committee's general recommendation No. 30 on women in

conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations would provide a useful reference for such a strategy. She sought more details about the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women and any efforts to evaluate its impact, and about the role of the new Commission for Family and Population Affairs and how it would ensure that due consideration was given to issues affecting women as individuals and not just as mothers.

31. **The Chairperson**, speaking in her capacity as an expert, urged the State party to address the pressing issues of violence against women, obstructions to the delivery of humanitarian aid and access to and redress for victims.

32. **Ms. Al Shammat** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the State party had received less than 25 per cent of the aid pledged to it. Food aid received had generally been sufficient. However, insufficient aid had been received to improve security services and the protection of women and children, prompting the Government to lobby the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ms. Valerie Amos, for increased aid. Bureaucracy was an impediment to the delivery of aid but the activities of the armed terrorist groups were also a major obstacle. Humanitarian convoys had frequently been commandeered at checkpoints and roadblocks by gangs looking to assume responsibility for aid distribution. In some cases the donors had subsequently been unable to ascertain the fate of the deliveries. The United Nations convoys that had crossed into Syria from Turkey had reached their destination, but only after significant delays. The Government had assured the Secretary-General of the United Nations and Ms. Amos that it was doing its utmost to ensure the safe arrival of aid but it was not in control of all roads and entry points.

33. A central component of the transitional justice plan was to ensure the organization of fair trials. Members of the Cabinet and the judiciary had been urged to treat all cases of rape as a war crime and to ensure that perpetrators were never immune from sanction. However, reports of rape at army checkpoints and abuse of human rights defenders had not been substantiated.

34. The Minister of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had indicated that all reservations to the articles of the Convention, including article 2, would be lifted in the near future.

35. **Ms. Kuteit** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the war had inflicted huge damage on the country's previously cohesive family structures, forcing countless women to assume the role of head of household after losing their husbands and sons. Those women were increasingly gaining the skills and confidence to rebuild the lost cohesion and stability. The National Association for Women's Role Development was working to empower women throughout Syria, running nurseries for children, shelters and rehabilitation and vocational training centres to help mothers enter employment and adjust to the realities and necessities of the new era. The reform of laws that discriminated against women was another important part of that process.

36. **Ms. Essa** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women was a very ambitious plan which sought to integrate the efforts of the State sector and civil society. In implementation of the strategy, the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy was working in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Labour to ensure that health and food supplies reached those most in need, including those who supported the armed conflict, irrespective of their affiliations, views and convictions. It was also working to document all violations perpetrated against children and women in regions that were hotspots during the conflict and, in the months ahead, would be running awareness-raising activities on tackling violence against women, working to raise funds from non-government donors, and looking to establish women's centres in every governorate to provide direct assistance. It had

established mobile "tent" schools for children in Syria, and electronic schools that were also able to cater for children living in refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan.

37. **Ms. Mahmoud Alasmar** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the security forces had been instructed not to hold women under the 60-day antiterrorist detention rule and to refer any woman suspected of a terrorism-related offence directly to the competent authority. The definition of terrorism under Syrian law was unambiguous. It related solely to acts that led to material or physical injury and did not regulate expressions of opinion or acts of incitement.

38. She assured the Committee that general recommendation No. 30 had been translated into Arabic and that training courses to raise awareness of its content, as well as of the content of the Security Council resolution, were in the pipeline. She also offered assurances that the Commission for Family and Population Affairs was careful to develop targeted strategies for specific population segments, such as children and the elderly. It did not use uniform strategies that focused solely on women's roles as mothers without recognizing their rights and needs as individuals.

39. **Ms. Patten** said that the Committee had received independent reports of acts of torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, rape and abduction against women by armed opposition groups. The Government should take steps to prevent, investigate, punish and ensure redress for those acts, in line with the Committee's general recommendation No. 30.

40. She requested further details of measures adopted to implement Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, specifically to incorporate a human rights and gender perspective into the peace efforts and develop a national action plan. She also requested an update on progress made since the November 2013 workshop organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs on the theme "Syrian women as the key to peace".

41. She enquired about action taken to prevent enforced displacement and protect the human rights of internally displaced women and girls. Was the State party willing to provide space for United Nations agencies and international and national non-governmental organizations to find ways of meeting the needs of internally displaced persons, women and children and other groups with specific needs?

42. **Ms. Haidar** asked about the inclusiveness of the peace and reconciliation process and why the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women had not yet been implemented, despite having been adopted in 2006. While appreciating the information provided on the situation of women in the State party since 2011, she would like to hear more about the period of stability between 2007 and 2011. She wished to know how the law on combating terrorism was being implemented and emphasized the need for civilian rights to be protected.

43. **Ms. Šimonović** said that she would like to see the documentation collated by the Government on cases of sexual violence. She welcomed the news of the State party's intention to withdraw its reservations to the Convention and asked when it might ratify the Optional Protocol. Did the Minister of Social Affairs personally believe that women were adequately represented in the peace and reconciliation process?

44. **Ms. Al Shammat** (Syrian Arab Republic) agreed that the United Nations was not receiving enough information on acts of violence and other human rights violations perpetrated by armed opposition groups. Many invitations had been extended to United Nations agencies and treaty bodies; however, most had been declined because of security concerns.

45. With regard to progress made since the workshop on Syrian women as the key to peace, she said that without real changes taking place on the ground any resolutions would remain empty words. The recommendations of the Geneva Conference on Syria (Geneva II) had become guidelines and been translated into an action plan, based on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).

46. There had been no failure on the Government's part in protecting the 6.2 million internally displaced persons. In the areas under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) and other armed groups, widespread violations were taking place and hundreds of girls had committed suicide because they had been forced into marriage. They were relying on the assistance of local communities and civil society organizations still working in the affected areas, and training had been organized on evacuation procedures. She reiterated the Syrian Arab Republic's appeal to the United Nations, as a major partner, to play a key role in helping evacuate women when armed conflict erupted because, to date, the Syrian Armed Forces had been managing evacuations single-handedly.

47. Four of the nine-member peace process delegation were women, which she considered to be adequate female representation. She regretted the failure of the Geneva II talks, but stressed that the solution to the conflict must be purely Syrian.

48. **Ms. Mahmoud Alasmar** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Government was protecting civilians from violence perpetrated by armed groups and was cooperating with United Nations and civil society organizations, notably in information exchange. Specific assistance was being provided to women who used to live in areas controlled by armed groups.

49. The events unfolding in Syria had stalled implementation of the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women, but a new strategy was under development that would give hope for change. It would take time to amend laws and adapt to women's new roles as breadwinners and heads of household as a result of the conflict.

50. The authorities were keen to set a 40 per cent quota for women in government posts. Women were represented in the Ministry of National Reconciliation, in the national reconciliation committees within the People's Assembly and in the community-level reconciliation committees. The resolutions adopted by the workshop on Syrian women as the key to peace included a call for even greater women's participation, which was being considered.

51. **The Chairperson**, speaking in her capacity as an expert, stressed that, in citing United Nations sources and other reports, there had been no intention to apportion blame. The Committee was aware of the scale of the suffering and violence, which called for strong and appropriate responses. She applauded the progress made thus far and underlined that all stakeholders were working together to ensure that all Syrian women were supported in their quest to re-establish their fundamental rights and to be involved in the reconstruction process.

Articles 4 to 6

52. **Ms. Patten** welcomed the target of a 40 per cent quota for women in government posts and encouraged setting a quota for women in the peace negotiations. The Committee had also recommended the adoption of temporary special measures in education and employment and in addressing the needs of some vulnerable groups such as widows, women with disabilities and older women.

53. In the light of numerous reports documenting violations of women's human rights she asked what mechanisms were in place: to ensure access to justice for women and girls; to prevent gender-based violence; to ensure adequate training on gender awareness for the

Syrian Armed Forces and intelligence services; and for capacity-building in the judiciary, including in the context of the transitional justice mechanism, with a view to ensuring its independence, impartiality and integrity.

54. **Ms. Leinarte** said that gender-based violence had been an issue of concern even before the conflict and the situation had worsened since, with the female body becoming a weapon of war, violated in various ways for different purposes. Had any research been carried out to identify the underlying stereotypes that had encouraged such widespread gender-based violence during the conflict? Since negative cultural traditions were the main sources of violence against women, she encouraged the State party to amend existing discriminatory legislation.

55. She commended the setting up of a national observatory to monitor domestic violence and a family protection unit to receive complaints, and the many studies conducted in that area. In that connection she asked about the status of the 2007 bill on domestic violence and why women victims of domestic violence were reportedly discouraged from using, or reluctant to use, shelters provided for them. Lastly, she asked what was being done to reintegrate women who had suffered sexual violence or any other violence during the conflict, especially internally displaced women.

56. **Ms. Gabr** asked whether a national action plan on combating human trafficking had been drawn up, in line with the Palermo Protocol. Had there been any prosecutions against traffickers and were there any trials under way? She wondered what steps were being taken to protect young Syrian girls in Turkey, Jordan or elsewhere from various forms of exploitation. Reportedly human trafficking and trafficking in organs occurred mainly in the camps in Turkey, while child marriages were prevalent in the camps in Jordan. Could the delegation elaborate on reports of forced child labour by both parties in the conflict and that children were being used as human shields?

57. She expressed concern that the amendment to the nationality law allowing Syrian women married to foreign nationals to pass their nationality on to their children did not apply to children born from the sexual jihad and *surah* marriages (girls forced into marriage by parents at an early age to protect their honour). It was unacceptable to punish mothers who had been raped or married in such conditions, and children on account of their fathers; it would lead to a generation of children denied their right to identity. She urged the State party to amend its legislation on the legal age for marriage: the fact it was so low for girls had been exploited in the refugee camps. According to UN-Women, early marriages accounted for over 50 per cent of female refugee marriages in Jordan. What steps were being taken to protect the victims and prevent further violations? Lastly, she requested further information on the *kafalah* (guardian-style adoption system) situation, which had become a serious problem, especially where guardians were free to take their wards abroad.

58. **Ms. Haidar**, noting that the new law on political parties had not included the expected quota for women, said that political systems changed and the transitional period called for special measures; the quota system must be prescribed by law. Coming from a country with 17 different sects, each with their own personal status code, she expressed concern about the effects of sectarian law in the State party, and encouraged it to adopt a civil code without further delay. Furthermore, how did the State party intend to address refugee host countries' claims that they could not enforce their laws in Syrian refugee camps, when Syrian law still permitted early marriage?

59. **Ms. Al Shammat** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Syrian Arab Republic was committed to ensuring that women achieved real representation, rather than representation based purely on gender quotas. The law on political parties had been promulgated before the 2012 Constitution and should be brought into line with the Constitution which referred extensively to political pluralism. Some people considered that the current conflict made it

impossible to address the issue of sectarian law. The time was ripe to amend the Personal Status Code with a view to making it more secular; alternatively, an optional civil code could be drawn up in parallel. The issue of sects had been exploited in the Syrian Arab Republic. The fighting was giving rise to human trafficking with foreign fighters being promised beautiful Syrian women if they came to fight. Mechanisms had been established to implement the law on human trafficking, including a national action plan, and centres had been set up to assist victims. Cases of organ trafficking were also being reported to the authorities.

60. As to the situation of Syrian girls trafficked over the border for early and forced marriages, the Syrian Government had tried to contact the authorities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. However, the authorities claimed that they were powerless: the girls were Syrian and subject to Syrian law, but their non-Syrian husbands to the laws of their own countries. The Syrian Government had been working with civil society organizations to monitor the situation of girls and women in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, but establishing communication with the refugee camp in Turkey was virtually impossible.

61. The Government had recently refused requests from families to take children abroad under the *kafalah* system and the "adopting" families had responded that the children would have to return to the special centre set up for the many children deprived of parental care. The centre had excellent resources and respected the children's privacy and the confidentiality of information concerning them. There were currently 300 such children in the centre, in addition to children whose parents had committed terrorist acts.

62. **Ms. Mahmoud Alasmar** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the possibility of establishing a system to protect and provide support for victims of sexual violence, with the help of civil society organizations, was under consideration. Training would be provided for the judiciary on protecting women's rights and human trafficking issues, and on the provisions of international conventions and the recommendations of the United Nations human rights treaty bodies.

63. She agreed that legislation should gradually be introduced to prohibit honour crimes and punish the perpetrators, and to prohibit the forced marriage of victims of rape to the perpetrators. Many internally displaced and refugee women were reluctant to admit that they were rape victims. Civil society organizations played a key role in reaching out to them, trying to convince them to report the crimes and ensuring they received support.

64. The Government was working towards the elimination of forced child labour, the recruitment of children into the Armed Forces, and early and forced marriages. It aimed to raise the age of marriage to 21 for both women and men, granting exceptions only after the age of 15 for both sexes. Regarding the system of *kafalah*, a new law had been introduced on alternative protection, which would ensure that the best interests of the child were taken into consideration and that all their rights were guaranteed. The aim was to place children in families where possible, rather than in institutions.

65. **Ms. Akkach** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that both men and women had equal access to justice. Any complaint lodged by women about violations of their rights, including sexual violence or rape, was investigated, prosecuted and punished in accordance with the law. Legal costs were minimal and legal aid was available to those with insufficient resources. The Syrian judiciary was fully independent and implemented the legislation in force. The Criminal Code included provisions on acts of violence committed by family members and stipulated that in all cases men and women should be treated equally before the law. Prosecutions were based on medical reports, which could be obtained free of charge.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.